

# Daily Record

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## Booker-Sherrill to FEMA: End Pequannock flood map dispute that is costing residents

**William Westhoven** Morristown Daily Record

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Sen. Cory Booker and Rep. Mikie Sherrill are pushing the Federal Emergency Management Agency to resolve a long-running dispute with Pequannock officials who say hundreds of residents are paying the price for improper placement of their properties into designated flood zones.

"We urge you to take swift action to resolve outstanding issues with the [preliminary Flood Insurance Rate Map, or pFIRM] and to work collaboratively with the township of Pequannock to finalize an accurate map," they wrote in a letter last week to FEMA officials.

Eight months after the National Institute of Building Sciences concluded FEMA should "revisit" its problematic 2016 maps, FEMA last month informed township officials the remapping process would take an additional 24 months, delaying the adoption of maps until 2023, or seven years after the dispute surfaced, they wrote.

"This delay is not acceptable – especially if it results in FEMA Region II executing a partial adoption of the pFIRM in Morris County, when these map changes could have an impact on other riverine communities throughout the county," Booker and Sherrill wrote.

They also wanted to know why FEMA would not consider any further submissions of updated modeling from the community.

"These extensive delays have created real and tangible adverse impacts on Pequannock and our constituents," the letter reads. "In addition to the costs and resources expended by this small community to appeal these maps, the pFIRMs have caused great uncertainty in the housing market and requirements for flood insurance."

Pequannock officials say the pFIRM improperly increases the percentage of structures in the flood plain to 21%, and the number of structures in the floodway from 6 to 336. Depending on the affected property, required flood insurance premiums can cost homeowners more than \$1,000.

The classification also can decrease property values by as much as 25%, Pequannock officials say.

"Residents have experienced difficulty selling their homes, obtaining mortgages or home equity loans, or obtaining permits for home improvements," Booker and Sherrill wrote.

Pequannock appealed the 2016 pFIRM, which FEMA revised in August 2017. But even on the revised map, township officials noticed that areas that never flooded even during Tropical Storm Irene in 2011 were included in the flood plains.

When FEMA denied the appeal in February 2019, Pequannock quickly filed a second appeal in March 2019 with the National Institute of Building Sciences' Scientific Resolution Panel, an independent, third-party panel of experts. In June 2020, the Scientific Resolution Panel unanimously determined that the pFIRMS did not meet FEMA standards.

Specifically, the appeal to the research panel argued FEMA's mapping of the Pompton River and East Ditch area was "based on insufficient scientific or technical data." It also stated the mapping of the East Ditch area was incorrect based on "mathematical errors existed in analyses supporting revised flood hazard boundaries and base flood elevations."

The science panel concluded the "model and flood plain/floodway mapping revisions were found to not meet FEMA's guidelines and standards for flood risk analysis and mapping."

Responding to the Booker-Sherrill letter, FEMA confirmed to the Daily Record and USA TODAY Network that after accepting the findings of the science panel, it took several months to reach an agreement with required contractors on March 1.

"Next steps will include reviewing data, developing hydraulic data and modeling, developing preliminary maps and running the maps through due process, including giving the community time for comment and adoption," FEMA spokesperson Rosa Norman wrote.

Meanwhile, Norman advised residents that the current pFIRM maps "are not regulatory products so they should not be impacting the premiums of National Flood Insurance Program policy, which are based off the current effective flood maps."

"Anywhere it can rain, it can flood," she wrote. "FEMA encourages all homeowners to carry flood insurance."

"Under any circumstances, this economic uncertainty would be difficult to bear, but during the current pandemic, the impact is magnified," wrote Booker and Sherrill, chairwoman of the U.S. House Science Subcommittee on Environment. "Getting the final FIRM correct is clearly a matter of great economic significance to this town and its residents."

*William Westhoven is a local reporter for DailyRecord.com. For unlimited access to the most important news from your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today. Email: [wwesthoven@dailyrecord.com](mailto:wwesthoven@dailyrecord.com) Twitter: @wwesthoven*